

RISK: Health, Safety & Environment (1990-2002)

Volume 12
Number 3 Issue number 3/4, Fall 2001

Article 9

September 2001


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Bernadette West

Jane Lewis

Michael Greenberg

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Bernadette West, Jane Lewis & Michael Greenberg, *Journalists' Views of the Environment: Issues and Challenges*, 12 RISK 299 (2001).

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Journalists' Views of the Environment: Issues and Challenges

Bernadette West, Jane Lewis & Michael Greenberg*

Introduction

Most Americans worry about the environment.¹ At the same time, many do not fully understand environmental issues. In a 1999 nationwide survey of 1,500 adults, 18 years of age or older, conducted by the National Environmental Education and Training Foundation (NEETF), respondents could correctly answer an average of only three out of ten simple knowledge questions about the environment.²

Over time, environmental issues and the risks they present have become more complex; therefore, presenting information on these issues in a form that can be easily understood and acted upon is critical. Studies show that the news media play a vital role in conveying information to the public about the environment.³ People turn to their televisions, radios, and newspapers for the information they need

* Dr. West is an Assistant Professor in the Health Systems and Policy Track at the UMDNJ School of Public Health, Piscataway campus. Prior to joining the faculty, Dr. West was Executive Director of MidState Health Advisory Corporation, a regional health planning organization in central New Jersey. She holds a B.A. in Sociology from Edgecliff College of Xavier University, an M.A. in Sociology from American University, Washington, D.C., and a Ph.D. in Planning and Public Policy from the Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy at Rutgers. *E-mail: westbm@umdnj.edu.*

Dr. Lewis is an Assistant Professor in the Health Education Track at the UMDNJ School of Public Health, New Brunswick campus. She holds a B.A. in Liberal Arts from Colorado Women's College, Denver, an M.A. in Journalism from the University of Missouri, and a Dr.PH in Health Education/Promotion from the University of Texas School of Public Health in Houston.

Dr. Greenberg is a Distinguished Professor of Urban Studies in the Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy at Rutgers. He holds a B.A. from Hunter College and an M.A. and Ph.D. in Geography from Columbia University.

¹ Gallop/CNN/USA Today poll (April 1999).

² National Environmental Education & Training Foundation (NEETF)/Roper Starch Worldwide, *Eighth Annual National Report Card on Environmental Attitudes, Knowledge, and Behavior*, at 41 (1999).

³ Theresa Byrd et al., *Variation in Environmental Risk Perceptions and Information Sources Among Three Communities in El Paso*, 8 *Risk: Health, Safety & Environment* 355 (1997).

on environmental issues and the risks they present.

While playing a critical role in helping the public understand environmental issues, journalists often feel ill-prepared to cover the environment. According to a 1993 survey of environmental journalists, very few journalists who cover environmental issues feel they have the knowledge needed to adequately cover their beat. Seven in ten reporters said they lack the training and background to cover technical environmental issues.⁴ Covering environmental stories requires an understanding of both the “science” involved as well as the many complex environmental laws that govern these issues.

*The Reporter's Environmental Handbook (The Handbook)*⁵ addresses some of these concerns. First published in 1988, *The Handbook* is designed to provide reporters and editors with easy access to environmental risk information needed to report effectively on complex and controversial stories and also to communicate risk information to the public. Faced with fast-breaking stories, journalists often have little time to consult with specialists. *The Handbook* provides reporters and editors with the background information needed to report controversial stories effectively and avoid the pitfalls that can mislead and misinform. The book has won praise from reviewers and a Special Award for Journalism from the Sigma Delta Chi Society of Professional Journalists in 1989.

A third edition of *The Reporter's Environmental Handbook* is currently being developed. To insure that the new edition addresses issues of concern to journalists in their communities, we surveyed a sample of environmental journalists to identify environmental issues important to them. We also asked them about the challenges they face in covering these issues in their community and their perceptions of the priorities placed on the environment by both the public and their newsrooms. The survey findings are reported here.

⁴ Survey conducted by the Foundation for American Communications (FAC), California (1993).

⁵ Sponsored by the Hazardous Substance Management Research Center (HSMRC) at the New Jersey Institute of Technology. All the authors of this article were editors of the second edition of *Handbook*. See *The Reporter's Environmental Handbook* (Bernadette West et al. eds., 2d ed., Rutgers U. Press 1995).

Method

In October of 1999, a survey was mailed to members of the Society of Environmental Journalists (SEJ). Membership includes journalists who work in radio, television, print media, government, and academic settings (N=877). It should be noted that membership itself in the SEJ is not equal across all four regions of the United States. There are more members from the South and West (28.9% and 29.6%, respectively) compared with members from the Northeast and Midwest (21.8% and 18.9%, respectively). An overall response rate of 32% was obtained after sending out a follow-up mailing to non-respondents. While a higher response rate was desirable, reporters warned us to expect a much lower rate of between 10% to 15 %.

The survey included an open-ended question asking journalists to list three environmental health issues of importance in their communities and a series of fixed-response questions. Journalists were asked to gauge (e.g. very well, somewhat, not very well, or not at all) the public's level of understanding of environmental health issues. The survey also asked journalists to rate, on a ten-point scale, the priority attached by their newsrooms and the public to environmental health issues and to rate how "hot" these issues are in newsrooms today compared with five years ago. Finally, using a five point Likert scale, journalists were asked about the extent to which factors, such as scarcity of information, lack of editorial support, community misunderstanding, and pressure from industry and environmental groups present challenges in covering environmental health issues today.

Analysis of responses to the open-ended question concerning "the most important environmental health issues" involved development of an initial list of all responses. Each journalist identified up to three issues. The 280 respondents identified a total of 633 issues. This list of 633 responses included much duplication. For example, a single issue such as water pollution was listed by many journalists. In an attempt to further limit the list to issues of general concern, we eliminated from the analysis duplications and issues that were identified by only one journalist. The eliminations resulted in 165 sub-topic areas.⁶

⁶ The remaining issues that were identified by only one journalist were grouped into an "other" category for further classification at a later date.

Review of this list by project team members showed that many journalists identified specific, discrete issues rather than broad general ones. Next, all project team members individually reviewed the initial list and then, as a group, discussed the issues in an attempt to develop broad, general categories that would cover the lengthier list of very specific issues. Project team members then grouped the 165 issues into 39 broad categories designed to capture all of the more specific issues. For example, issues involving environmental factors impacting reproductive health, synthetic chemicals, and estrogen mimics were regrouped under the broader category of estrogen disruptors. Issues such as automobiles, SUVs and air pollution, diesel emissions, deregulation of utilities, and tire fires were grouped together under the broader category of lower atmospheric air pollution. Low-level radiation concerns, ionizing versus non-ionizing radiation, electromagnetic fields, and cell phone towers were regrouped under radiation. Bio-diversity and species extinction, wetlands, logging and destruction of habitat, over-fishing and endangered species were regrouped under habitat protection and biodiversity. Mercury contamination, leaching of plastics, and leaking above ground tanks were combined under water pollution. Asthma in children, exposure to lead in the home, and second hand tobacco smoke were regrouped under children's health. After further discussion among project staff, the list of 39 categories was further condensed into a more manageable number of 23 broader categories that will be used as the basis for 23 new briefs in the third edition of *The Handbook*.

In addition to our analysis of the open-ended question regarding most important environmental issues, data from the fixed-response questions were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). As noted above, journalists were asked to rate issues using five and ten-point scales. For purposes of analysis, responses to the seriousness of challenges presented by various factors were grouped, with one to three coded as "not serious" and four to five as "serious." Ratings of the level of priority attached to environmental issues by newsrooms and the public were later grouped, with one to five coded as "low priority" and six to ten as "high priority." Similarly, ratings of how "hot" environmental health issues were today and five years ago were

also grouped, with one to five coded as "not hot" and six to ten as "hot."

Findings

There were slightly more male respondents than female respondents (55% compared with 45% respectively). The breakdown of respondents by region of the country is presented in Table 1. Respondents were classified according to the four census geographic areas: Northeast states, Southern states, Midwest states, and Western states. The largest percentage — 30% of our respondents — were from the West while only 19% of respondents were from the Midwest. When we compared respondents with non-respondents in our sample, we found that between 31% and 34% of potential respondents from each region responded to the survey, keeping in mind that regions were not proportionately represented in our sample frame of all members of SEJ.

Table 1
Demographics of Respondents

<i>Geographic region</i>	<i>Number of potential respondents</i>	<i>Number of actual respondents</i>	<i>Response rate per region</i>	<i>Regional representation in total sample (N=280)</i>
Northeast	192	61	32%	21.8%
South	258	81	31%	28.9%
Midwest	157	53	34%	18.9%
West	268	83	31%	29.6%
Unknown		2		0.70%
Total	877	280(32%)		*

* Because of rounding, percentages may not add up to 100 %.

Journalists' Views of Important Environmental Issues

Water concerns topped the list of environmental health issues. They were identified by over one-third of the respondents (37%). Issues in this broad category included water contamination by various pollutants, sources of pollution including industries such as mining and agriculture, and issues of water quantity and water rights. Issues categorized as atmospheric air pollution concerns were the second most frequently

listed environmental health issues. Review of these concerns showed they fell into three broad categories: lower atmospheric air pollution, upper atmospheric air pollution, and indoor air pollution. Twenty-seven percent of journalists identified issues grouped under the category of lower atmospheric air pollution. Concerns here included issues such as air pollution and automobiles in general and SUVs in particular, diesel pollution and particulates, and the impact of tire fires on surrounding communities. Eighteen percent of respondents identified issues grouped under upper atmospheric air pollution such as global warming, ozone, and cyclical solar activity. In addition, 2% of respondents identified issues grouped under indoor air pollution concerns such as radon, chemicals in the home environment, second-hand smoking concerns, and “sick building syndromes.” The complete list of broad categories identified most often by respondents can be found in Table 2.

Several broad categories of issues stand out regardless of what region respondents were from. Included here are issues grouped under upper atmospheric air pollution, issues involving endocrine disrupters, and issues grouped under waste management. Other issues were raised more frequently in certain regions of the country and less often in other regions. For example, journalists from the West were twice as likely to identify water issues and concerns about pesticide and herbicide use compared with journalists from the Midwest. Three times as many journalists from the Northeast compared with those from the Midwest identified lower air pollution issues. Respondents from the West were four times as likely as respondents from the Northeast to list habitat protection as an issue (48% compared with 10%).

Journalists from the Midwest were more likely to raise animal livestock issues compared with journalists from the Northeast and Western states. Journalists from both the South and Midwest were almost twice as likely to identify issues related to urban/suburban sprawl compared with journalists from the Northeast and West. Of the 59 journalists who identified issues related to genetic modification, only 12% were from the Midwest. Journalists from the other three regions were two times more likely to list genetic modification issues.

Table 2
 Twenty-three Environmental Categories Ranked in Order of the Percentage of Respondents
 Who Identified Issues Included Within the Category as "Important"

<i>Categories</i>	<i>Northeast</i>	<i>Midwest</i>	<i>South</i>	<i>West</i>	<i>%/# of all Respondents</i>
1. Water issues	20%	17%	30%	34%	37%(103)
2. Air pollution - lower atmosphere	32	12	31	25	27 (75)
3. Genetic modification of plants and animals	26	12	31	31	21 (59)
4. Air pollution - upper atmosphere	20	20	32	28	18 (50)
5. Endocrine disrupters	24	22	26	28	16 (46)
6. Pesticides/herbicides	27	16	22	36	16 (46)
7. Waste management - hazardous and non-hazardous	27	23	27	23	11 (31)
8. Urban/suburban sprawl	18	32	32	18	10 (28)
9. Marine/ocean/coastal issues	29	21	17	33	9 (25)
10. Habitat protection/ bio-diversity	10	19	24	48	8 (21)
11. Animal livestock issues (farm)	10	40	35	15	7 (20)
12. Food/nutrition issues	25	19	31	25	6 (16)
13. Future of environmental policy/regulation/politics	15	31	23	31	5 (13)
14. Risk issues	15	0	62	23	5 (13)
15. Cancer clusters	46	23	15	15	5 (13)
16. Radiation	8	17	8	67	4 (12)
17. Population growth	17	17	33	33	4 (12)
18. Cross border/global envtl. health issues	9	18	18	55	4 (11)
19. Children's health issues/ asthma/lead/tobacco smoke	30	40	10	20	3 (10)
20. Weapons of mass destruction/ biological hazards	13	13	38	38	2 (8)
21. Dioxin	13	13	50	25	2 (8)
22. Brownfields	43	29	29	0	2 (7)
23. Air pollution - indoor	33	33	0	33	2 (6)

Radiation issues and cross-border concerns were raised primarily by journalists from the West. No journalists from the South identified indoor air pollution as an issue. Concerns regarding the nature of risk and how it is reported were expressed most often by journalists from the South, while no Midwest journalists identified risk concerns. Half of all respondents who identified dioxin as an issue were from the South.

For issues that show regional variation, one can speculate on reasons for these variations. For example, the greater concern with dioxin in the South may be linked to the Times Beach incident involving dioxin.⁷ The greater emphasis on radiation issues in the West may reflect concerns over burial of spent radioactive materials. With regard to habitat protection, the emphasis placed by journalists from the West may be related to the success of environmental groups in bringing the issues to the forefront.

Journalists' Views of the Public and the Newsroom

As shown in Table 3, almost all respondents described the public as wanting more information on environmental issues. However, while viewing the public as interested in environmental issues, journalists in our survey felt the public does not understand these issues. Only seven percent of our respondents felt the public understands environmental health issues "very well" and another 39% felt they understand them "reasonably well."

While more than three quarters of our respondents (77%) felt that environmental issues are "high priority" stories for the public, they are less inclined to similarly describe their newsrooms as having the same opinion. Only 62% of journalists said these issues were high priority issues for their newsrooms. There was some variation by region in terms of the extent to which newsrooms were described as placing a high priority on environmental health issues. Journalists from Western and Southern states were more likely to rate environmental issues as "high priority" issues in their newsrooms — 74% and 60% compared with 56% of journalists from the Northeast and 50% of journalists from the Midwest ($p < .05$).

⁷ In 1983, TCDD-contaminated waste oil was sprayed on local roads in Times Beach, Missouri, to keep the dust down. This forced several residents to permanently leave their tainted community.

Table 3
Findings From Studies of the Public, Journalists, and Newsrooms with Regard to
Environmental Issues.

Importance of Environmental News:		
For the public	% of the public who said they were very or somewhat interested in environmental news stories ¹	86%
	% of SEJ journalists who felt the public wants more information on environmental health issues	97%
	% of SEJ journalists who felt environmental health issues are a high priority for the public	77%
For newsrooms	% of SEJ journalists who felt environmental health issues are a high priority for newsrooms	62%
	% of news directors who thought the general public is "very interested" in environmental stories ²	17%
	% of SEJ journalists who said lack of support from editorial staff represented a "serious challenge" in presenting environmental health information to the community	33%
Knowledge of Environmental Issues:		
Of the public	% of the public who rate themselves as having either "a lot" or a "fair amount" of knowledge about environmental issues and problems ³	69%
	% of SEJ journalists who felt the public understands environmental health issues "very well" or "reasonably well"	46%
	Average # correct answers (out of 10) for the public on a test of knowledge on basic environmental issues ⁴	3.2
Of journalists	Journalists who report lacking the training needed to cover environmental issues ⁵	72%

¹ Radio and Television News Directors Foundation (RTNDF) 1998 survey.

² *Id.*

³ National Environmental Education and Training Foundation (NEETF), 1999. Up from 64 % in 1995.

⁴ *Id.* Random guessing would have produced 2.5 correct answers. Respondents with college degrees averaged 3.1 correct.

⁵ Survey conducted by the Foundation for American Communication, California, 1993.

Journalists' Views of the Challenges They Face

As shown in Table 4, community misunderstanding represents the greatest challenge journalists face with regard to covering environmental issues. Half of our respondents identified it as a "serious" challenge.

One third of our respondents identified lack of support by their editorial staffs as a “serious challenge” in covering environmental news stories. Overall, more journalists (37%) felt that pressure from industry represented a “serious” challenge in covering environmental health issues compared with 20% who described pressure from environmental groups as a “serious” challenge.

Table 4
Percentage of Journalists Reporting “Serious” Challenges from Various Factors by Region

	<i>Northeast</i>	<i>South</i>	<i>Midwest</i>	<i>West</i>	<i>Total</i>
Community misunderstanding	58%	42%	47%	51%	50%
Pressure from industry	38	40	21	41	37
Scarcity of information	37	37	30	36	35
Lack of editorial staff support	24	38	33	34	33
Identifying experts	32	31	26	27	28
Pressure from environmental groups	18	24	7	27	20

Perceptions of these challenges varied somewhat by region. Journalists from the Northeast were more likely to view community misunderstanding as serious and reporters from the South were least likely (58% and 42%, respectively). Journalists from the West and South were twice as likely to rate pressure from industry as “serious” compared with those from the Midwest. Journalists from Western states were almost four times as likely to rate pressure from environmental groups as a “serious” challenge compared with journalists from the Midwest.

Discussion

There are many similarities in our findings from our journalists and their work covering environmental issues and other studies that have examined environmental issues in relation to both the public and newsrooms. There are similarities in terms of what journalists identified as the important environmental issues and a list of issues identified by the National Environmental Education and Training Foundation (NEETF) as issues considered critical for the future by the scientific community. The list includes polluted water, air pollution, freshwater

shortages, cutting of large forests, population increases, loss of animal and plant species, and climate change.⁸ Given the important role of the media in conveying environmental information to the American public, it is encouraging to note that journalists and scientists in the field considered the same environmental issues to be important.

The perceptions of our journalists regarding the public's high level of interest in environmental issues are in line with recent studies that show most Americans are very interested in the environment. A 1998 study by the Radio and Television News Director Foundation (RTNDF) found that 86% of the public said they were either "very" or "somewhat" interested in environmental news stories.⁹

While recognizing the importance of environmental issues for the public, respondents felt that the issues are not always a high priority for newsrooms. One-third of our journalists said environmental health issues were "low priority" for their newsrooms — despite the fact that in 31% of these "low priority" newsrooms the public was described as placing a "high priority" on environmental health issues. In other words, journalists suggest that the media's focus in some communities may not be in "sync" with the priorities of the public. A similar disconnect between the priorities of the public and the media has been observed elsewhere. In the same 1998 RTNDF survey, eight out of ten members of the public said they were very interested in environmental stories, while only 17% of news directors thought the general public was very interested in these stories.

It is important to learn more about why the environment is considered a lower priority in some newsrooms. From the findings, it is not possible to determine the basis for the lower priority observed by journalists in certain newsrooms. It is not clear if it reflects a general tendency newsrooms to devalue environmental health issues or if it is only a possible reduction in their importance relative to other events occurring at the point in time when the survey was conducted in 1999. It is possible that the disjuncture between what the public sees as a priority and what newsrooms view as a priority may be linked to the

⁸ NEETF, *supra* n. 2, at 20-21.

⁹ Survey conducted by Radio and Television News Directors Foundation (RTNDF), (1998). This study was part of RTNDF's News Judgement and Ethics Project, supported by a grant from the Ford Foundation.

complexity of environmental health issues. These complexities make environmental reporting difficult for reporters covering the general beat. Almost three-fourths (72%) of journalists surveyed by the Foundation for American Communication reported they lacked the training needed to cover complex environmental issues.¹⁰ It may be that as a consequence, these issues have been less enthusiastically embraced by newsrooms that find it more cost effective for reporters to cover stories about crime, sports, and celebrities, which lack the complexity of environmental stories.

It appears that today we face a challenge. The public wants and needs more information on environmental health issues but the complexity of these issues means that journalists cannot provide useful information to the public without adequate background information themselves. *The Reporter's Environmental Handbook* will be designed to meet some of these challenges by providing succinct background information, "pitfalls to avoid" in reporting that might confuse the public, important points for researching each issue, and sources for additional information, including important Internet sites. Plans also include making the new edition of *The Handbook* available on the Internet as well as in hardcopy.¹¹



¹⁰ FAC, *supra* n. 4.

¹¹ For information regarding obtaining a copy of the third edition of *The Reporter's Environmental Handbook*, contact the authors.